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# A Dreary Life on a Barge: From L'Atalante to Young Adam

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Walter Metz

## A Dreary Life on a Barge:

*From L'Atalante to Young Adam*



*Young Adam*: The barge amidst the Scottish landscape

### PRELUDE

While surfing around Netflix looking for the name of the film in which Ewan McGregor played James Joyce – Nora (Pat Murphy, 2000) – I stumbled across *Young Adam* (David Mackenzie, 2003), a film in which the young Obi-Wan plays a man who gets involved in a romantic triangle aboard a river barge. Immediately, I thought of *L'Atalante* (Jean Vigo, 1934), the most famous barge movie of all, and indeed, one of the most emotional experiences of this filmgoer's life. After watching *Young Adam* when it arrived in the mail (an analysis of the profound connections between the cinematic and postal joys that Netflix provides I will save for some other time), I became confused.

If there is anything further in spirit from *L'Atalante* – a romantic fairy tale about the enduring power of love – it must be *Young Adam*, a bitter tale of an astonishingly amoral drifter who kills one woman and uses all of the others he encounters to quaff his ruthless sexual appetite. And yet, Mackenzie's film – repeatedly and perhaps unavoidably – echoes scenes and situations from *L'Atalante*. Is *Young Adam* a deliberate, deconstructive remake of Vigo's masterpiece, or just a circumstantial engagement with its plot material?

I belabor my discovery of *Young Adam* because this intertextual configuration's hold over me led also to the literary artifact on which Mackenzie's

## PRELUDE

film is based, a Scottish Beat novel by Alexander Trocchi. Also entitled *Young Adam*, Trocchi's novel, first published in 1954, has an obscure history that is as fascinating as the tragedy of Vigo's life cut short by tuberculosis. In fact, Vigo directed much of *L'Atalante* from a stretcher, in a tubercular-induced fever. How does Vigo's psychic condition while directing relate to the drugged stupor in which Trocchi composed his fiction, including his masterpiece, *Cain's Book* (1960), the autobiographical depiction of a heroin addict which established his status not only in the Scottish literary canon, but in the international realm of 20th century literature? We are thus left with a triangular intertextual configuration with profound repercussions for film adaptation studies. For while Mackenzie's *Young Adam* is a fidelity-based adaptation of Trocchi's novel, both texts are of interest for film studies in their engagement with *L'Atalante*.

My discovery of Trocchi's novel points to a major difference between the kind of adaptation study that my work offers and that is engaged by most literary scholars interested in film. Typically, people trained in literary studies will write about the films that are made out of the important work they study. My approach – to let interesting films lead me back to novels upon which they happen to be based – not only produces a different form of adaptation criticism, but it also more appropriately matches the ways in which people who are not academics watch films and read books. While there are certainly non-academics who care more about novels than films, it is an indisputable fact that the size of the audience for any film – with the exception, perhaps, of *The Bible* – is orders of magnitude greater than that of

the novel on which it is based. Taking this into account in the way we write about film adaptations seems a crucial corrective to, for example, the abundance of Shakespearean film criticism written by Renaissance, and not film, scholars.

This essay, then, proposes to see Mackenzie's film from the point-of-view of an adaptation scholar whose method takes film history just as seriously as literary history. In effect, this means that I will analyze the film using an intertextual grid in which the influence of *L'Atalante* is taken into consideration as much as is Trocchi's source novel. As a corollary, this also means that the Scottish status of both Trocchi's novel and Mackenzie's film are internationalized with a concern for the relationship between the French cultural depiction of gritty life on the barges with its Scottish counterpart. Interestingly, the literary response to Trocchi's novel, small though it may be, addresses a similar transnational concern. In his introduction to the Canongate edition of Trocchi's novel, John Pringle argues: "Young Adam, with its self-obsessed, probably self-deluded, possibly insane narrator has a literary ancestry stretching back to Hogg's *Justified Sinner* (André Gide admired Hogg, and Trocchi admired Gide, and so the two-way traffic between Scottish and French writing continues)" (viii). This line of literary history activates interesting questions about French cinema of the 1930s. To what extent is Vigo's *Surrealism* in *L'Atalante* related to Gide's modernism, and how might we see these earlier forms of cultural rebellion as influences on the Existentialist and Beat post-war culture of France, Scotland, and the United States? The raising of these sorts of questions attests to the power of an intertextual, interdisciplinary method for studying textual artifacts.

FROM SCOTLAND TO FRANCE,  
AND BACK AGAIN

*L'Atalante*, one of the unquestioned canonical masterpieces of the cinema, was directed by Jean Vigo in 1934. It features a narrative study of the complex relationships among four people on a barge carrying coal between Paris and Le Havre. At the beginning of the film, Jean (Jean Dasté), the captain of the boat called *Atalante*, marries a small-town girl, Juliette (Dita Parlo), who is hoping for a life more exciting than the one offered by her village. Juliette arrives on the boat to find it already occupied by Jules (Michel Simon), the captain's mate, and a cabin boy (Louis Lefebvre). Cheated out of the opportunity to finally see

Where *L'Atalante* is about romantic love, downplaying physical intimacy, Alexander Trocchi's *Young Adam* is about sex, not believing in the possibility of love. Like *L'Atalante*, the novel concerns four people squished onto a barge, this one traveling the canals in Scotland between Glasgow and Edinburgh. A woman Ella owns a barge, the *Atlantic Eve*, which is captained by her husband, Leslie. Why do both films link their barges to the Atlantic Ocean? Do they, like Antoine Doinel at the end of Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959), look to that ocean for a cinematic relationship with the United States?

Leslie hires on a first mate, Joe, the first-person narrator of the novel. Leslie and Ella have a young son, Jim. As the novel opens, Joe discovers a young



*Young Adam*: Joe fishes Cathie's body out of the river

Paris, Juliette decides one day to venture out on her own. Wounded by this betrayal of him, Jean returns to Le Havre, abandoning Juliette to the city. When Jean almost loses his job due to living life in a stupor without his beloved Juliette, Jules returns Juliette to Jean, and the film ends happily.

woman's body lying in the canal. This woman turns out to be Cathie, Joe's former lover. Joe sat passively by while Cathie drowned, with his unborn baby in her womb. When Joe learns that Leslie is impotent, he begins an affair with Ella, right under Leslie's nose. When Leslie discovers the affair, he

leaves the boat. Shortly thereafter, Joe leaves Ella. The novel ends with Cathie's lover, a plumber, being wrongly sentenced to death for her murder. Joe attends the trial, but as with Cathie's death, does nothing to stop the unjust events unfolding before him.

Most reviewers of the film version of *Young Adam* begin with the observation that it is reminiscent of *L'Atalante*. Roger Ebert begins his review, "Two men and a woman on a barge. No one who has seen Jean Vigo's famous film *L'Atalante* can watch *Young Adam* without feeling its resonance." In her reflections on Mackenzie's film, Liza Bear comments: "The handsomely mounted result bears little resemblance to Jean Vigo's classic, *L'Atalante*, in story or sensibility, yet it retains that author's fascination with the melancholy rhythms of barge life." As I indicate above, there is more to be said, theoretically, about the triangular relationship between the film version of *Young Adam*, its novelistic source, and *L'Atalante*. From an adaptation studies perspective, *L'Atalante* and Trocchi's novel compete as intertextual motivations for the visual narrative that is Mackenzie's project.

The credits to the film version of *Young Adam* are presented over a poetic shot of a white swan in a Scottish river. Mackenzie cuts between these beautiful shots above the water and underwater shots which observe a duck paddling along. A long shot of a boat with the registry of Glasgow is reminiscent of the opening shot of *L'Atalante*, which presents its boat, the *Atalante*, on a French river. However, very quickly *Young Adam* leaves behind the visual poetry of *L'Atalante*'s presentation of river life: the camera tilts upward to reveal a dead body

floating on the surface of this river. Joe (Ewan McGregor) sees the body, and tries incompetently to grab it with a boat hook. Leslie (Peter Mullan), Joe's captain on the barge, laments, "Ah, you're bloody useless, gimme that," as he drags the dead woman's body onto the dock. They stare at the dead woman's barely clothed body a little bit too long, until Joe suggests, "I suppose we should cover her." Leslie reluctantly agrees. Joe covers the woman's body with a burlap sack, gently touching her with his hand.

From an intertextual studies perspective, the presentation of the woman's body in the water at the beginning of *Young Adam* firmly establishes this film's difference from *L'Atalante*. In Vigo's film, the confrontation between woman's body and her male lover's search for her in the water represents the climax, not the beginning, of the film. After a rocky start to their marriage, in which Juliette has strayed from Jean to find excitement on the streets of Paris, he realizes how much he loves his lost bride. At the beginning of the film, during the more playful times of the newlywed period of their marriage, Juliette has told Jean of a fairytale in which one person will see his soul mate by looking into the water. In her British Film Institute book on the film, Marina Warner analyzes the scene as crucial to the film's intensive study of romance: "As in the game of cherrystones or skipping rhymes, the beloved's identity can be magically discovered under water" (28).

Jean makes a joke of this story, first putting his head in a bucket, then into the Seine, but neither time seeing Juliette's face. Later in the film, at the depths of his despair at having lost his beloved, Jean again tries to

see Juliette's face in the bucket. He fails a second time. The boat's mate, Jules, spits into the bucket, declaring Jean "completely crazy." However, this time, when Jean jumps into the water in search of his love, he has a

working in Paris, sleeping in a bed of her own. Juliette leans forward, also unable to sleep, in a fit of erotic desire. Through the language of cinematic editing, Jean and Juliette "touch each other" in their sleepy



*L'Atalante*: Jean's underwater vision of Juliette

completely different, transcendent, experience. We see him swimming into the camera in close-up. Suddenly, Vigo presents us with superimpositions of Juliette waving her hands while wearing her wedding dress. Juliette, who is not often shown by the film in close-up, is discovered smiling.

Shortly after this mystical experience, Jean goes below and tries to sleep. We see him unable to do so, tossing and turning in his bed. Vigo cross-cuts this with Juliette, now

reverie. In the film's next scene, Jean runs down to the ocean at Le Havre. On the beach, he runs away from the camera. Finding nothing down at the water's edge, he returns to the dock. Seamen there accuse the distraught Jean of being a drunken sailor.

This presentation of fairy tale love is the antithesis of that offered by Mackenzie's *Young Adam*. Joe is a brutally self-serving Id who has sex with women merely because there is nothing else to do. In a sense, *Young*



*Adam* deconstructs the romantic love in *L'Atalante*, producing a tale of brutally lonely sex without love. In the film's back story, Joe has briefly reunited with his lover, Cathie. They have sex under a truck, dirtying themselves on the grease which has leaked below. Afterwards, Cathie tells Joe that she

is pregnant with his child. Joe does not believe her, as she has been seeing a married man, a plumber named Daniel Gordon (renamed from Daniel Goon in the novel). Joe gets up, disgusted at what he falsely imagines as a betrayal. Cathie chases after him on the river bank. She slips, falling into the water in the dark of night. Joe stands motionless, looking down at the active current. He calls out after Cathie, but she does not respond.

Instead of jumping in to rescue Cathie, he gathers up all of her clothes and throws them into the river, wiping his fingerprints off all the surfaces he can remember touching.

Joe thus denies himself the underwater encounter with his beloved that is the emotional climax of *L'Atalante*. Whereas Jean is suspicious of Juliette's fairy tale story, he at least considers trying to find her visage in the water. The film becomes his development, as he is finally able to possess the concern for another human being to imagine seeing her in the water with him. Joe in *Young Adam* is never given such a chance. While he clearly

knows that the right thing to do is jump in the water to rescue Cathie, he maintains a commitment to hedonistic nihilism. When he is given the chance to help rescue his beloved, he instead decides to let her die.

Similarly, Joe's encounter on the beach is a kind of inversion of that

offered in *L'Atalante*. While Jean goes to the beach to look in vain for his true love, Joe first meets Cathie there. He sits in the sand, noticing Cathie at some distance away. He smiles at her, and she smiles back. He goes over to talk with her. They smoke cigarettes together, after which he invites her over to a rock formation inside of which they can have sex without being seen. She obliges. Thus, whereas for Jean the beach scene

represents his desperate search for his lost true love, for Joe the beach is just one in a series of meaningless sexual conquests, this time a documentation of the meeting between himself and the girl he will eventually let die in the river. While Vigo wants us to see his flawed characters' transcendence, in the novel version of *Young Adam*, Trocchi insists upon the animalistic nature of human sexuality: "There is a point at which a man and a woman stalk one another like animals. It is normally in most human situations a very civilized kind of stalking, each move on either side being capable of

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*For all of its deconstruction of the romanticism of L'Atalante, however, the film version of Young Adam is deeply committed to the fusion of lyricism and a gritty depiction of the working class that also characterized the poetic realism of Vigo's film. Both films give a dark, dirty presentation of what life is like for people caught in the prison of river barge life.*

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more than one interpretation. This is a defensive measure" (31). Mackenzie's film depicts this animal stalking with the stark gaze of the camera lens.

For all of its deconstruction of the romanticism of *L'Atalante*, however, the film version of *Young Adam* is

deeply committed to the fusion of lyricism and a gritty depiction of the working class that also characterized the poetic realism of Vigo's film. Both films give a dark, dirty presentation of what life is like for people caught in the prison of river barge life. For the novel's Joe, the

barge reminds him of a coffin: "Often when I woke up I had the feeling that I was in a coffin and each time that happened I recognized the falseness to fact of the thought a moment later, for one could never be visually aware of being enclosed on all sides by coffin walls" (53). Regarding the opening of *L'Atalante*, Warner suggests that "the entire atmosphere evokes a funeral, not a wedding — the shadowy lighting, the coffin-like box of the barge, the expressionless guests and the drowned bouquet" (20). Simultaneously, both films offer beautiful cinematography in order to image painterly compositions of the gritty industrial life of the river and its surroundings.

In addition, both films rely on narratives celebrating the intimate contact between barge workers, a human contact missing in the bourgeois lives which these films critique. In both *L'Atalante* and *Young Adam*, the barge workers know each other intimately and go to share in male camaraderie,

drinking in pubs. *Young Adam* also features a sequence which offers quintessential male bonding in the poetic realist tradition. Early in the film, Ella brings Joe and Leslie hot water so that the men can wash the black coal dust off of themselves. While Leslie at first

complains to Ella that Joe is getting all of the hot water in his bowl, the scene quickly shows how commonplace this male intimacy is. Joe and Leslie scrub each other's backs without talking. They then discuss going to a pub that night to play darts.

This scene is reminiscent of one in Jean Renoir's *La bête humaine* (1938), a poetic realist masterpiece made shortly after *L'Atalante*. In that film, Lantier (Jean Gabin) and Pecqueux (Julien Carette) are equally sooty men who drive a train together all day as engineer and coal man. At the end of their arduous work day, they retire to the train company barracks to clean off. In a scene that Dudley Andrew reads as metaphoric of the celebration of the human need for contact, Lantier and Pecqueux share their ham and eggs to form an omelet: "When Pecqueux offers to mix his eggs with the ham Jacques Lantier contributes to their breakfast in the workers' canteen, we are beyond friendship and enter the sacramental ritual of Renoir's socialism" (304).

For all of its engagement with French poetic realism, *Young Adam* is also a quite faithful adaptation of Alexander Trocchi's eponymous novel. The plot details of the novel are rendered almost in the exact sequence from the

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*Simultaneously, both films offer beautiful cinematography in order to image painterly compositions of the gritty industrial life of the river and its surroundings.*

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novel: Leslie and Ella work the barge together as husband and wife, taking on Joe as their first mate. Soon, Joe seduces Ella, and sleeps with her at every opportunity, while Leslie leaves them alone to go drinking in the pubs along the river. When Leslie finds out about the affair, he leaves Joe and Ella alone together on the boat. At the end of the novel, Joe leaves Ella, and attends the trial of Daniel, but again passively sits by while the judge sentences the innocent man to be executed.

The faithfulness of the film raises questions as to what Mackenzie intends to accomplish with an adaptation of an obscure Beat novel from the 1950s. The film is ambiguously set in post-war Scotland, before the British economic recovery of recent years. In both novel and film, the characters speak of a time when the life of the bargemen will come to an end. Ella wants to retire from the horrific life and buy a flat in the suburbs of Edinburgh, but it is patently clear that this will never happen, neither with Leslie nor Joe.

However, despite the faithfulness to the plot, Mackenzie's film has a profoundly different effect than that of Trocchi's novel. Most importantly, Trocchi's novel is a relentless existential critique of human disconnection. The film version softens this critique of Western civilization by rendering Joe's character more human. This softening

of Joe's character occurs both through plot details and through the star inter-text of Ewan McGregor.

In terms of plot, the novel's Joe has a relentless hatred of children. Forced



*Young Adam*: Joe saves Ella's son, Jim

to spend life cramped together on the barge with Leslie, Ella, and their child, Jim, Joe obsesses about how much he loathes the child, at one point calling Jim a "moronic child" (103). A bit later, while Joe is thinking about having sex with Ella's repulsive sister, Gwen, Joe describes Jim as "eel-like" (105). The film softens Joe's contempt for children substantially. In the most important adaptational change, the film includes a scene where Joe saves Jim's life when he falls off the barge. While reading a book on deck, Joe suddenly sees Jim fall into the river with another barge steaming towards the boy. Without hesitation, Joe jumps into the water and rescues the lad. Ella runs over and thanks Joe tearfully. This narrative event leads toward the conclusion that, while Joe is a moral reprobate, he is, at his core, salvageable. No such hedging is presented by Trocchi's novel.

The film does mention Joe's hatred of Jim, but it is presented indirectly. Whereas the novel's Joe narrates to us his hatred of Jim, Ewan McGregor's Joe speaks to Cathie about his hatred for Jim, but it is never presented when Jim and Joe are in the same physical space. Significantly, the film links Joe's feeling for Jim with his response to Cathie's announcement of her pregnancy. Cathie tells Joe that she would like to marry him and make a new family. Joe responds by observing that every time he sees Jim, he wants to kick him over the side of the boat. However, given Joe's having saved Jim's life, we know that this is disingenuous.

Furthermore, the star intertextuality related to McGregor's performance as Joe softens his character even more. Given the importance McGregor has to the Star Wars films—he channels quite exquisitely Alec Guinness as a young man to portray Obi-Wan Kenobi as he mentors the young Anakin Skywalker—it is hard to see Joe in *Young Adam* as a complete misanthrope. This sense is reiterated in *Young Adam* when, shortly after Joe's inaction during Cathie's drowning, he returns to the barge that dawn. McGregor's Joe leans his head sorrowfully against the wall, with an expression of remorse on his face. In the novel, which is addressed to us through first-person narration, we never hear any inkling that Joe regrets his inaction during Cathie's death.

Trocchi's method in creating Joe as a monster is quite clear. Like Bertolt Brecht in *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), he produces a villain as bad as he can imagine, juxtaposes him against the backdrop of ordinary capitalist Western civilization, in order to show that the latter is not much better than

the former. This is best expressed in the novel's ending, when Joe goes to attend Daniel Goon's murder trial, but once again refuses to intervene when a wrong is being done. The novel presents, through Joe's words and vision, the insanity of the Western judicial system, particularly its smug belief in capital punishment. Joe says he wants to attend the trial to witness a "legal murder" (131), presumably in contrast to his illegal murder of Cathie. Joe connects his guilt over the affair—he is, after all, a (failed) writer—with Shakespearean tragedy: "The image of Cathie's naked body floated before me, like Macbeth's dagger" (131). However, unlike Lady Macbeth going insane at her guilt for Duncan's murder, Joe is a blank emotional slate, taking little action to redeem himself. At one point, he writes a letter to the judge declaring Daniel's innocence, but without proof of his assertions it is clear this is a meaningless and hollow gesture.

Like an adolescent rebelling against his parents, Joe treats the court proceedings with contempt. He loathes the judge's "righteousness" (131), joking that if they had trials in the nude, no one would be convicted (132). Trocchi revels in Joe's scatological critique of the proceedings. At one of the trial's recesses, Joe goes into a milk bar, sits in the lavatory drinking whiskey, and then urinates (133). Upon his return, Joe rages at the judge believing himself to be a god. He declares the proceedings a mockery, "a parliament of birds" (134), presided over by an unctuous judge who is "a venomous old turtle" (136). Joe wishes that he could help Daniel escape the "social syllogism" in which he has been placed (without ever acknowledging in words his own role in placing Daniel there!). Instead, Joe,

again, takes no action, with the novel ending in apocalyptic stasis. In the last chapter, Joe thinks about screaming out the truth as the judge condemns Daniel to death, but existential stasis intervenes: "no more bets" (145), as if invoking Jean-Paul Sartre's screenplay, *Les Jeux Sont Ffaits* (written 1943, published 1947). The novel ends with the collapse of its narrative world: "All I know is that suddenly Mr. Justice Parkinson was gone and the disintegration was already taking place" (146).

The ending of Trocchi's *Young Adam* was viciously critiqued by the literary community as juvenile tripe. However, critic John Pringle tries to re-situate this aspect of the novel: "It's too easy to dismiss outsider writers and their readers as infantile: alright for adolescents kicking against the pricks of authority for the first time and seeking an example to follow, but not worth serious consideration" (v). As I have tried to make clear, especially with regard to the ending, the critics Pringle attacks express very well my own reaction to reading the ending. However, Pringle's larger point, that Trocchi's novel is an unduly neglected aesthetic achievement, is also fully defensible. While I do not at all support Trocchi's drug-addled critique of bourgeois civilization, the fact remains that I was profoundly moved by his depiction of a morally irredeemable character. Here, Pringle's critical project of trying to find a new generation of readers for *Young Adam* dovetails with Mackenzie's film project. For while the Canongate edition of *Young Adam* did not achieve a large enough cultural presence for me to discover it upon publication, Mackenzie's film project did, and this is an achievement that should not be discounted. I am forever enriched

by the knowledge that the 1950s Beat critique of bourgeois hypocrisy extends far beyond Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs (a close friend of Trocchi's, largely, apparently, and lamentably, because of their heroin addictions) to as remote a place for me as the post-war Scottish literary scene.

David Mackenzie is rapidly becoming one of Scottish cinema's major directors, not so much for the conventional cinematic genius of his films, but instead because of his audacity as an adapter of difficult, perhaps even conventionally "unadaptable," novels. With no small amount of critical foresight, Pringle writes in his introduction: "Detail is sparse, the prose is sparse and gritty as the monochromatic industrial landscape framing the action—cinematic prose. *Young Adam* is a movie just waiting to be made, although how to create on film the narcissistic, neurotic mess that is Joe's consciousness is anybody's guess" (ix).

Mackenzie eschews any attempt to match modernist stream-of-consciousness in the cinema; all such attempts have always, and unequivocally, failed. Instead, the film uses conventional classical narration (announced flashbacks, third-person observational camerawork, shot-reverse shots for dialogue scenes) to tell Trocchi's story of Joe's moral depravity. Mackenzie's film strips Trocchi's novel of its dated 1950s existential philosophy, replacing it with an intensive study of a bad young man who does not transcend his human limitations. Mackenzie's film is an exquisite example—too little acknowledged by literary scholars writing about film adaptation—of a film which is quite simply better executed than the novel on which it is based. Ewan McGregor's considerable skills as an actor bring a

humanity to Joe which Trocchi either could not, or would not, bring to his novel.

No better scene illustrates this than Joe's "custard rape" of Cathie. In the late 1940s, Trocchi got his start as a writer by penning pornographic novels for Maurice Girodias at Olympia Press in Paris. Girodias would supply Trocchi with lurid titles—*Helen and Desire* (1954), *White Thighs* (1955), *School for Sin* (1955), and *Sappho of Lesbos* (1955)—and Trocchi would write the genre potboilers from there. Ironically, *Young Adam* was also first published by Olympia Press in Paris, in 1954, but as Trocchi's first serious novel. It was only in its re-published form, by Heinemann in London in 1961, that Trocchi added the work's only truly lascivious scene, in which Joe slathers Cathie with custard and rapes her.

The scene is presented in flashback as one of Joe's memories of Cathie. Significantly, Trocchi motivates this reminiscence via Joe's anger at the denizens of a bar who are reflecting lewdly on the murder trial. Joe anticipates the trial as "a fantastic puppet-play" (120), but resents the bar patrons' comments about her for their "purience" (121). This prompts Joe's flashback to the rape scene. Joe was living with Cathie, trying to write a "masterpiece" of a novel (121). However, because he thinks literature is "false," he sits in her apartment for eight months not having written a single word. Having worked all day, Cathie returns to the flat, exhausted. As she changes her clothes, Cathie has a fight with Joe, who insists that she eat the custard he made for her. When she refuses, Joe throws the custard at her.

He becomes aroused at her custard-covered naked body and begins beating her with a stick from the fireplace.

Inspired by the custard dripping off of her breasts and vagina, Joe douses her in blue ink. Ironically, and this is certainly the point, this is the only writing of significance that Joe is ever able to produce, through violence done to his supposed lover's body. Unable or unwilling to determine whether Cathie is crying or laughing, Joe rapes her, attacking her with what Joe describes as "prick and stick" (124). The scene is related to the reader using the standard conventions of male point-of-view pornography: at one point Joe adds Orientalism to his sins, stating that Cathie was so covered in foodstuff that she was "almost unrecognizable as a white woman" (124). Joe leaves the apartment, only to return later to discover Cathie, having cleaned up the apartment, asleep in bed. The scene ends with Cathie sleepily hugging and kissing her assailant in bed.

The custard rape scene is included in Mackenzie's film version without any significant change. Mackenzie's defense of it, however, when questioned about its anti-feminist content, reveals the film's project, which differs significantly from the existential nihilism of Trocchi's ending. In an interview for *IndieWire*, Liza Bear engages Mackenzie with significant critical force. Bear states that a woman is abused in the film. Mackenzie feigns to not know who is abused. Mackenzie insists that Cathie is not: "It seems that your opinion is not an opinion that I would want people to have. I wanted a snapshot of a relationship in action in which people have arguments and rows and can be cruel to each other and able to make up." The interview never recovers from this argument, as Mackenzie gets more and more defensive. He finally explodes:

Let's hold off the feminist stuff. It's nonsense. I was very, very conscious in this story to make the relationships between Joe and all the women as balanced as they possibly could be. None of the women are going into their encounters with Joe with their eyes closed. Both in the novel and in the film Joe says he's not interested in relationships unless they're mutual. We're allowed to be postfeminist, aren't we?

Mackenzie refuses to let the argument go. Later in the interview, Bear tries to nuance her critique of the film's gender politics: "There's a lot of fucking in the film. What's good is some of it is woman-sensitive sex," to which Mackenzie peevishly retorts, "Even though a female character is abused." However, Bear lets Mackenzie get the last word,

started happening. By the end of the film he has a story."

By this point, I hope it is clear that my sense of, particularly the novel, but also the film, is in keeping with Bear's. Joe is a hopeless reprobate, who uses others for his own childish sexual pleasure. However, Mackenzie's sensibility of what his film means is borne out in its images. The film, for example, ends not with the destructive nihilism of Trocchi's novel, but with what Mackenzie intimates is Joe's growth as a writer. After leaving the sentencing phase of the trial, Joe returns to the scene of his crime, stopping at the exact spot on the river bank where Cathie died. He throws a mirror she had given him as a present, with the words, "Think of me when you look at yourself," into the river. The camera cranes forward into a frontal close-up



*Young Adam*: The final close-up of Joe, isolated

which I think strikes at the heart of the matter: "One of the things that drew me to the novella was the poetic dry sensuality with which he regards the world around him. He was a writer with no inspiration and as soon as he threw the typewriter into the canal the real story

of Joe's face. He turns away from the camera, and walks out of focus, as the end credits roll.

Again, star intertextuality matters greatly in how to read this moment. Mackenzie's interpretation of Joe's moral ambiguity—rather than Bear's

and my own, which emphasize his morally irredeemable nature—is bound up in the kinds of roles with which McGregor is associated. In particular, McGregor’s Christian in Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge* (2001) fits Mackenzie’s interpretation of Joe to a tee. In keeping with that film’s intertextual re-working of Puccini’s opera, *La Bohème*, Christian is only able to write his story once his beloved, Satine, has died of tuberculosis. In Mackenzie’s view, Joe is more than a sexual predator; he is someone who can move beyond his ill-fated encounter with Cathie. While I do not at all agree with Mackenzie’s defense of this very old, very tired script as “post-feminist”—it is as anti-feminist as it gets—it is certainly clear that the film, through its camerawork and its acting, presents a Joe who is very different from the sexual predator of Trocchi’s novel.

film—particularly *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992)—Swinton brings a complexity to the character of Ella. The film’s editing, as does the novel’s first-person narration, makes clear that Joe is only attracted to Ella after he discovers Cathie’s body. That is to say, Joe diabolically uses his relationship with Ella to hide from the police as they search for a predatory loner as Cathie’s murderer. However, Swinton’s Ella is no passive victim to Joe’s predation. When Joe first makes advances to her, fondling her leg under the table right in front of Leslie, Ella swats Joe’s hand away as it reaches her crotch, giving him a vicious look that could melt steel.

In the film’s crucial scene testing Ella’s resolve, Joe and Ella make love while Leslie is at the pub having a drink. Joe watches a fly crawl across Ella’s nipple; Ella meets this moment of male voyeurism (on both Joe’s and the



*Young Adam*: A fly on Ella’s nipple fascinates Joe

Similarly, the casting of Tilda Swinton adds a further humanist thread to Trocchi’s Ella. Famous for her roles in feminist international art

film’s part) with her coldest line of the film: she taunts Joe, asking him, “Are you scared now?” She follows through on her challenge, arousing him with her



hand. After having sex for the second time in a few minutes, they both fall asleep, only to wake up to discover Leslie stomping around the deck, having discovered their betrayal of him.

#### CONCLUSION

This argument against the misanthropy of Mackenzie's version of *Young Adam* at least partially addresses the perplexing question of why an obscure Scottish novel from the 1950s would be adapted into a major production of a rising national film culture.

At its best, Mackenzie's *Young Adam* meditates on a grimy industrial past which is only one generation removed. This was, in fact, the primary way in which Roger Ebert was able to build his defense of the film: "Although Britain and Ireland now enjoy growing prosperity, any working-class person thirty or older was raised in a different, harder society. That's why actors like McGregor and Colin Farrell, not to mention Tim Roth and Gary Oldman, can slip so easily into these hard-edged, dirty-handed roles."

Seen through the light of national cinema studies, the adaptation of *Young Adam* becomes a profound meditation on the recent history of Scotland: the film deconstructs a brutal literary artifact from a time when post-war capitalism ground up its working-class. The film looks back on the people victimized by that social system, not with nostalgia, but with an eye toward

understanding them as people, as complex characters with many failings, but also hopes and dreams. Mackenzie's sexism notwithstanding, the film succeeds, I think, due to the

powerful acting talents of Swinton and McGregor, who breathe life into these wounded souls.

In positioning *Young Adam* in this way, I am now ready to return to *L'Atalante*, that beloved object of cinematic humanism. For, I believe *Young Adam* and Vigo's film, for all of their

surface differences, are not so distinct as critics have asserted. While Vigo's film certainly centers the possibility of romantic love in a way that *Young Adam* refuses, they are both also dark, brooding films about the grungy life aboard the barges. *L'Atalante* is certainly positioned in a historically distinct way from *Young Adam*: Vigo's film hangs on the leading edge of the Popular Front, a time in France when the working-class was celebrated and finally rewarded politically.

Trocchi's *Young Adam* could not inhabit a more distant space, a United Kingdom ravaged socially and economically by the Second World War, barely able to recover from its effects. Trocchi's novel, like much French Existential literature, is a dour, brooding reflection on human beings' inability to recover from their own barbarity. However, Mackenzie's use of this novel emerges from a different time in Scot-

land's history, one in which the barge life depicted is now relegated to ancient history, replaced by the consumer life of pleasure cruises on the canals.

All of this begs the question, of course: what kind of Scottish national culture does the adaptation of *Young Adam* build? To address this question, I think we need to return to Trocchi's place in Scottish literature. As James Campbell narrates it in his essay, "Alexander Trocchi: The Biggest Fiend of All," the story goes that, in 1962, Trocchi and William Burroughs attended the Edinburgh International Writers Conference. The celebrated Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, was given keynote speech prominence so that he could argue for Scottish cultural nationalism. Trocchi stood up, unknown to anyone except as the man sitting next to Burroughs, and dismissed MacDiarmid's work out of hand. With *Young Adam* as his only publication in the United Kingdom, Trocchi boldly asserted that MacDiarmid's work was "stale, cold porridge. Bible-clasping nonsense. Of what is interesting in Scottish writing in the past twenty years or so, I myself have written it all" (1). Shortly afterward, in *The New Statesman*, MacDiarmid called Trocchi "cosmopolitan scum" (Campbell, "Biggest Fiend," 2). With the exception of *Cain's Book*, Trocchi's work has been all but ignored. Even James Campbell, who at least has taken the effort to publish academic analyses of Trocchi's work, dismisses *Young Adam* as "a flawed and badly constructed

novel" (Campbell, *Dictionary*, 2).

Given Trocchi's less than stellar presence as a man of letters, Mackenzie's decision to adapt his first novel (a project on which the filmmaker struggled for nine years) is remarkable. And yet, I believe it marks the well-being of Scottish national cinema. Mackenzie is quickly establishing himself as an adapter of literature that is hardly obviously well-suited for the cinema. His subsequent release *Asylum* (2005) is an adaptation of another difficult novel, by Patrick McGrath, the king of British neo-Gothic literature, and concerns a psychiatrist's wife who develops a relationship with one of her husband's patients in a mental institution. As Dudley Andrew argued to me long ago, the strength of any national cinema should be measured by the audacity of its middle-ground practitioners (not its geniuses and not its hacks): Mackenzie's place in Scottish cinema speaks well in this regard.

It is not clear what will happen to Mackenzie in the future. Typically, the Hollywood machine swallows up accomplished directors from small national cinemas. In 2005, Mackenzie was hired to direct a Hollywood film, *Nico*, a bio-pic of the Warhol starlet from the 1960s. Slated for a 2006 release, now five years later, the project has not yet emerged. It is possible, if not probable, that Mackenzie will find a path that negotiates his role as a Scottish artist in the global, Hollywood film economy. Here's to hoping that he succeeds.



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